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Childhood Ethics: An ontological advancement for childhood studies

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Abstract
We describe an ontological approach to childhood studies that we refer to as *Childhood Ethics*. This involves an interdisciplinary orientation toward examining the morally-meaningful dimensions of matters that affect young people. We draw on our empirical research with young people from 3-17 years old, examining their experiences in a diversity of contexts and geographical settings. Our investigations challenge dominant binary conceptions of young people along lines of decisional in/capacity and im/maturity. We argue for a view of children as active agents with meaningful relational engagements and participation interests and capacities and outline corresponding implications for research and practice.

Introduction

Young people's daily experiences can involve significant ethical concerns. For example, these can include keeping secrets about gender identity, bullying at school, or maltreatment at home, as well as situations where children cooperate with unwanted medical treatments to please their parents, Indigenous children with life-threatening illnesses seek traditional healing practices rather than biomedical treatments, or HIV prevention information is withheld from young people in communities where discussion of such topics is forbidden. Additional less 'dramatic' concerns may go unnoticed, perpetuating moral distresses and inequities that can characterize the daily lives of many young people (Carnevale et al., 2015; Miller 2010).

Our team came together to advance an interdisciplinary program of research and practice development focused on the ethical dimensions of services oriented toward young people; including, education, child welfare/youth protection, health care, and youth justice. Using an interdisciplinary approach - drawn from *childhood studies* - we promote interdisciplinary exchanges to advance our understandings of the moral lives of young people; developing a field of inquiry and practice that we refer to as *Childhood Ethics*. Our research program is called VOICE: Views On Interdisciplinary Childhood Ethics (www.mcgill.ca/voice) (Carnevale, 2016). (NB: In this article, the terms *children* and *young people* are used interchangeably and along with *childhood* refer to persons below the age of majority. We acknowledge that *children* may not seem to adequately include older young people or *youths*. We have used *children* to maintain congruence with terms used in the field of Childhood Studies and with the definition of children in the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child*; United Nations, 1989).

We have conducted empirical research with young people from 3-17 years old, examining their experiences in a diversity of contexts (e.g., health, mental health,

schooling/other forms of education, child welfare, community organizations) within Canada, within Indigenous communities, and internationally (e.g., France, Italy) including global child health settings (e.g., Brazil, India, Tanzania). We have also conducted normative analyses in several countries. Our investigations challenge dominant binary conceptions of young people along lines of decisional capacity vs. incapacity. Our work examines tensions within views of young people as vulnerable, incapable, and in need of protection of their best interests compared to emerging conceptions of young people as active agents with meaningful relational engagements and participation interests and aspirations. Our work raises significant implications for research, education, policy, and practice.

Although our work started with a focus on ethics relating to childhood (i.e., ethical concerns that affect young people), we have shifted to a focus on childhood with ethics as a theoretical framework. Specifically, we have developed a hermeneutic ethical lens for examining all matters that affect children. Drawing on Charles Taylor's conception of human agency (Taylor, 1985), all inquiry in the human sciences is ethical, as human experiences are oriented by morally-rooted *social imaginaries* regarding 'the good life' and 'horizons of significance'. We are advancing a Childhood Ethics ontological conception of young people, centered on agency, that we think should inform new directions in childhood studies. This builds on existing childhood studies work by developing an explicit ethical focus within this field. Although we draw on Wall's philosophical and religious history of ethical thought in light of children (Wall, 2010), we are advancing conceptual and methodological frameworks for empirical research and professional practice. We examine the ethical dimensions of agency, expand interdisciplinarity to integrate health-related disciplines, and we relate research inquiry to innovation in professional practice where binary conceptions of children are dominant and problematic (e.g., im/mature;

decisional in/capacity). We draw primarily on children's own voices and experiences in our research, examined and interpreted through a hermeneutic ethical lens (Carnevale et al., 2015). The aims of this paper are to articulate this Childhood Ethics ontology and discuss how this can be operationalized in research and practice.

In the closing section of this article, we demonstrate how this ontological approach can be used to orient professional practice with a specific example. The example involves a 9-year-old child with end-stage cancer who tells a nurse that he does not want to continue with chemotherapy but does not want his parents to know his wishes because he thinks they will be disappointed in him.

Intersections with law

The conceptualization of Childhood Ethics that we articulate in this paper involves significant intersections with law. Drawing on 'legal pluralism' (Macdonald, 1986), we approach law in a way that avoids attributing complete authority to formal rules (e.g., legislation). In the context of Childhood Ethics, those rules interact with the norms - whether found (e.g., in clinical practice or a young person's family or religious community) or relevant codes of professional ethics - that constitute the 'legal framework' governing any particular context (Menski, 2011). Law is not separate from social factors at play in our lives and is necessarily just as nuanced and multi-factored as other interpretative enterprises (e.g., ethics). Law includes both formal rules and the processes of giving those rules meaning in context (Macdonald, 1986).

Actors who participate in decision-making relevant to young people – health care professionals, social workers, teachers, parents, and children themselves - are all engaged in the negotiation of elements of the relevant legal frameworks. The way they do this might be referred

to as 'childhood ethics', taking seriously the input of young people. Even when a judge makes a determination of best interests or capacity, all these elements (pieces of the legal framework) will be relevant (Ménard, forthcoming 2020). Moreover, understanding the purposes for which particular formal rules were enacted is often as important as referring to their literal scope of application. Simply citing a rule - such as the age of consent in a particular jurisdiction – does not answer the range of questions that actors engaged in Childhood Ethics must ask. Rather, the rule must be incorporated into a discussion enriched by voices and contributions grounded in practice, experience and relationships (Van Praagh, 2005). This integrated interdisciplinary approach to law's place in the ongoing development of Childhood Ethics helps ensure a deeper appreciation of the normative dimensions of children's lives and how these inform the evolving content and forms of law.

A new ontology of young people

Agency and young people

A prominent theme in the childhood studies literature relates to the recognition of children as agents. Drawing on Taylor`s *Politics of Recognition* (1992), in our work, recognition implies an acknowledgment of the legitimacy of the agency claims of a person or a group of persons. Recognition helps define a person's or group of persons' identity, i.e., 'a person's understanding of who they are, of their fundamental characteristics as a human being' (Taylor, 1992, p. 25). Recognition can entail obligations toward the ways those persons are treated. In our ontological conception, we move beyond arguing that young people are agents. Rather, we endeavor to show the ethical implications of this agency, which entails a clarification of how agency should be recognized, by whom and in what manner.

Although agency is a central focus in this area of research, the concept remains underdeveloped, lacking a clear agreed-upon definition and conceptualization that outlines its features and demonstrates how it can be operationalized in research and practice (Coffey & Farrugia, 2014; Esser, 2016; Esser,et al., 2016; Valentine, 2011). Broadly, agency in young people refers to children's active contribution to the shaping of their social worlds and to society (Esser et al., 2016, p.2). It is unclear whether young people require any particular capacities (e.g., cognitive, relational, physical) to be recognized as agents. Agency is sometimes associated with autonomy, although the similarities and differences between these concepts remain under-examined. Can young people be agents while also dependent on others to promote their best interests (i.e., non-autonomous)? Should agency entail a capacity to bear responsibility for one's action? What role should young people have in addressing these questions?

Our Childhood Ethics conception of agency attempts to address these issues, as they have significant ethical underpinnings. Our conception of agency draws on Taylor's hermeneutic contributions to the human sciences (Taylor, 1985). Taylor has contested dominant conceptions of 'personhood', shaped by objectivist behavioral views of human action in Anglo-American psychology. Behavioral research emphasized that human action was 'shaped' by environmental factors, which could reinforce or extinguish various behaviors. In time, behavioral theories were adapted to also include cognitive processes to develop cognitive-behavioral accounts of human action, rooted in statistical depictions of how various factors could predict specific outcomes. Taylor argued that these models concealed a significant dimension of human life: that persons are self-interpreting agents who continually discern what is meaningful in particular situations and act in terms of their understandings of what matters (Taylor, 1989). Moreover, 'what is meaningful' and 'what matters' is not individually chosen, contrary to what individualistic

conceptions of personhood might imply. Rather, agents are continually interpreting what matters in light of background 'horizons of significance' and 'social imaginaries', as one's surrounding community shapes the 'goods' or values that orient one's 'moral imaginaries'; i.e., local conceptions of good/bad, right/wrong, our just/unjust (Taylor, 1989). Persons are relationally embedded. Agency is not 'individualistic autonomy' because the views of others are ethically significant for agents. Taylor has highlighted how the apparent collapse of widely-shared communal views and shared interests, within modern secularization, has fostered atomistic conceptions of autonomy; i.e., individualistic views of persons as self-determining agents. In contrast, Taylor's articulation of agency converges with relational conceptions of autonomy (Stoljar, 2011; Taylor, 1985).

Taylor has argued that persons are self-interpreting agents whose actions are rooted in self-understandings and interpretations (Taylor, 1971). However, he has not explicitly addressed how these ideas relate to young people. Although some young people may not be considered to have specific capacities required to be legally authorized to engage in some activities (e.g., voting, driving, consenting to health care), they may still be regarded as active agents striving to understand their meaningful surroundings to discern their sense of what matters (Esser et al., 2016). As agents, young people can also have views relating to their wishes for privacy and confidentiality (Noiseux et al., 2019). Moreover, young people can have concerns regarding the wellbeing of others. Agency does not refer exclusively to 'self-interests'.

There is a paucity of knowledge on how agency in young people should be recognized in practice and in policy. For example, does recognition of young persons' agency entail a full accommodation of their decisional preferences? Likely not, as many young people are not considered legally autonomous to make decisions. Then, what should recognition of their agency

involve? These two questions – *What is agency in young people*? and *How it should children's agency be recognized*? – have been orienting questions in our Childhood Ethics research.

We conducted a concept analysis of children's agency within the health literature, to examine how it is imagined within one realm of children's lives, health. We concluded that 'children's agency could be defined as children's capacity to act deliberately, speak for oneself, and actively reflect on their social worlds, shaping their lives and the lives of others. This definition entails that multiple forms of expression can be used to speak for oneself, including speech and bodily expressions, and that the capacity of children to enact agency is not dependent on adults as facilitators of agency' (Montreuil & Carnevale, 2015). Moreover, our scoping review of moral agency across childhood-related disciplines demonstrated that developmental psychology perspectives dominate this literature (Montreuil, Floriani, Noronha, & Carnevale, 2018). Other less-prevalent themes regarded moral agency as: (a) active in children; (b) absent in children; (c) a competence influenced by context; and (d) a narrative construction.

These reviews highlight that further research is needed to address knowledge gaps regarding agency in young people. To help address these knowledge gaps our research has focused on young people's *moral experiences*. '[M]oral experience encompasses a person's sense that values that he or she deems important are being realised or thwarted in everyday life. This includes a person's interpretations of a lived encounter, or a set of lived encounters, that fall on spectrums of right-wrong, good-bad or just-unjust' (Hunt & Carnevale, 2011). Examining young people's moral experiences, across a variety of contexts, has helped reveal the ways that they are morally aware, concerned, engaged, and active; demonstrating the diverse dimensions of their agential lives, the forms of recognition that are important to them, and how agency is affected by social context.

Challenging dominant conceptions of child development and 'maturity'

The recognition of agency in young people raises complex questions about the interpretation and utilization of developmental research. Dominant binary conceptions of children - as either capable or incapable of participating in significant decisions - refer to conceptions of decisional capacity and voluntariness related to cognitive, brain, and social 'maturity' (AAP, 1995; Coughlin, 2018; Miller, 2010). For example, professional practice standards commonly require an evaluation of decision-making capacity to determine the weight that should be attributed to children's voices (Coughlin, 2018).

Developmental research is commonly taken up in child-focused professions (i.e., education, psychology, health professions, law, social work) in a manner that construes young people's differences from adults as deficiencies, attributed to 'immaturity', which disqualify their voices as ethically meaningful and worthy of consideration (Bluebond-Langner & Korbin, 2007; Lee, 2001; Prout, 2000). Children's expressions tend to be viewed as immature voices that may call for comforting, which can be experienced as patronizing by young people (Bluebond-Langner & Korbin, 2007; Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008; Lee, 2001; Prout, 2000). A major criticism within the childhood studies literature is that dominant uses of child development research, drawing mainly on stage-based models, perpetuate problematic conceptions of childhood (Greene *& Hogan, 2005)*. Critiques have argued that (a) early developmental research, which led to 'developmental stages' theories, was based primarily on research with boys and young men and then generalized to girls and young women (Gilligan, 1982); and (b) dominant theories are based on ethnocentric classist research (e.g., with mainly white middle-class participants) that is generalized to all young people (Bluebond-Langner & Korbin, 2007;

Burman, 2017). Significant advances in the child development literature strive to redress these concerns. For example, transactional models characterize child development as influenced by a dynamic bidirectional interplay between children and their social environments (e.g., home, school, neighbourhood, culture) which mutually influence each other throughout the life span (Sameroff, 2009). Development is reciprocally rooted in relationships – relationships that change people and people that change relationships leading to dynamic and reciprocal processes of change and development. Development is always socially contextual. However, these transactional conceptions of children's development are largely absent from the dominant conceptions of children and childhood in literature within the various child-focused professions (AAP, 1995; Coughlin, 2018; Montreuil, Floriani, Noronha, & Carnevale, 2018).

Critiques of developmental research have been articulated extensively in the childhood studies literature. However, this literature has not adequately addressed how developmental research can still make useful contributions to our understandings of childhood and related practices. In our view, child development could be framed in terms of diversities, rather than maturity, while emphasizing the significant impact of social contexts on children's outlooks; in line with transactional conceptions of children's development. Social contexts contribute to children's diversities. Conceptions of maturity that are based on stage-like developmental trajectories toward a unified conception of maturity (e.g., Kohlberg's stages of moral development) can perpetuate singular views on the 'normal' outcomes of development (e.g., individualistic autonomy) (Bluebond-Langner & Korbin, 2007; Gilligan, 1982). These can displace other ways of being (e.g., interdependent relational autonomy) as less mature or psychologically troubled. Some 'universalizing' forms of child development can conceal important variations and diversities among young people, while also under-representing

additional diversities concealed through data collection and analysis approaches (Bluebond-Langner & Korbin, 2007; Gilligan, 1982; Greene & Hogan, 2005). Studies that use a transactional model of how individual differences develop and examine bi-directional interactions with their environment present a more holistic view of commonalities and diversities in developmental trajectories (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Magnusson & Stattin, 2006; Sameroff, 2009). The challenge for interdisciplinary research is to develop knowledge on the multiplicity of experiences and individual differences while bringing overarching frameworks of coherence and unity to our understandings. Developing this 'unity in diversity' framework will advance not only our understanding of development through the life span but also the how, when and why to intervene.

Understanding how young people's experiences can affect their outlooks and practices has an important place in childhood studies research. We recognize that young people 'develop' in the course of their lives. For example, some relational experiences can help young people understand how to navigate trust in relationships with others (Noiseux et al., 2019). Some young people can be more vulnerable without having these experiences to orient them to the varying degrees of trustworthiness that they can rely on in their relationships. Moreover, relational experiences can expose young people to diverse norms and dimensions in different social and cultural contexts. For example, some communities may favor an *a priori* granting of trust toward others as a form of respect while other communities may consider trust as a relational dimension that is 'earned' through the course of specific relationships. Different contexts are rooted in different social imaginaries of good and bad (Carnevale, 2013), which young community members can learn and understand in a variety of ways as they navigate their agency within their community.

Drawing on rich insights advanced by anthropologists of childhood examining children's perspectives across cultural contexts (Bluebond-Langner & Korbin, 2007), as well as transactional conceptions of children's development (Sameroff, 2009), we resist framing children's experiences, interests or capabilities in terms of age-based categories. These bodies of research have highlighted the importance of focusing on local contexts and children's particular experiences, rather than age, toward advancing a 'thick' understanding of childhood diversities. We have therefore favored 'moral experiences' as our empirical research focus, anchored in a hermeneutic framework for inquiry in research and practice. This is described further in the final two sections of this paper.

Social institutions

Social contexts affect young people's agency, continually fostering and impeding multiple forms and dimensions of agential experience and expression. Important aspects of young people's social contexts are *social institutions. Social institutions* can be defined as the organized sets of ideas and expectations that shape societal efforts to address young people's lives (Kendall et al., 2001). These can be examined in institutional settings, that is, concrete social spaces in which these ideas and expectations materialize in everyday discourse and practice. It is through these settings that social processes like childhood socialization, moral education, protection, discipline and cultural transmission are enacted. *Social institutions* that can be relevant for young people include family, home, education, schooling, child welfare, the law, child psychology, and health care.

In our own research, we have demonstrated how young people's moral experiences and expressions of agency are shaped by these *social institutions*. Young people inhabit multiple

social institutions that may exert diverse, sometimes contradictory, influences on them. For example, a group of young people in rural Tanzania live within families in a community where strong taboos regarding HIV operate, conveying strong prohibitions on HIV prevention education as well as HIV-related discussions among young people (Sebti et al., 2019). Concurrently, some community initiatives within schools and health institutions have supported a growing group of youth leaders to become HIV prevention educators conducting peer-to-peer education activities. Even in the face of significant obstacles that can entail serious reprisals, young people can lead community actions that are beneficial to them and their peers, revealing the social basis of their agency. In other Montreal-based research, young people have demonstrated agential action as they engage in community organization activities to learn ways to navigate oppressive experiences within their schools and families or participate in research to reveal humiliating or harmful practices in a child mental health program (Montreuil et al., 2017; Montreuil, Ménard, & Carnevale, 2018; Montreuil et al., 2019) . That is, young people as agents can draw on *social institutions* that they consider supportive (i.e., a community organization) to learn how to better express their agency within other *social institutions* that they experience as oppressive (i.e., school, family).

Relating agency to normative concepts

The ontology of childhood articulated in this paper requires a reconciliation of potentially conflicting understandings of key morally-rooted concepts such as agency, best interests, protection, responsibility and obligation, privacy and confidentiality, rights, autonomy, decision-making capacity and authority, as well as legal norms and standards that relate to young people. A comprehensive examination and reconciliation of all the concepts listed would exceed the space available. We therefore focus on a central problem: how can the recognition of agency in

young people be reconciled with obligations of others (namely, parents and others with responsibilities toward children) to protect young people according to their best interests (Archard & Skivenes, 2009; Thomas & O'Kane, 1998). In many situations, young people demonstrate preferences and engage in actions that can be considered agential expressions but can also appear contrary to their best interests: e.g., children refusing medical treatments (such as blood transfusions) for a readily treatable medical problem; engaging in an intimate sexual relationship where there is a significant age or power imbalance; wanting to keep secret physical or psychological maltreatments that they experienced.

This problem reveals a tension regarding the ethical and sometimes legal weight that should be accorded to young people's voices. Should young people's expressed preferences supersede their best interests, in the name of recognizing their agency? The ontological shift that we are arguing for can help reconcile this problem. This 'agency vs. best interests' tension reveals a binary conception of young people that is rooted in developmental 'stage-ist' views: that all young people can be mapped onto a developmental trajectory where there is a presumed clear threshold regarding their legal capacity to make decisions and bear responsibility for those decisions (Coughlin, 2018). Below this threshold, they are considered incapable and therefore in need of protection of their best interests. Beyond this threshold, they are considered sufficiently autonomous to make their own decisions, even if the decisions appear contrary to their best interests (NB: the legal relevance of best interests in relation to decision-making capacity can vary somewhat from one legal jurisdiction to another) (Coughlin, 2018).

This binary view of young people can perpetuate a number of harms. For example, young people can be excluded from participating in discussions and decisions about their health care or child welfare proceedings, justified as a way of protecting them when they are considered

decisionally incapable. Likewise, the participation of parents (or others with parental authority) in such discussions and decisions is framed in similar terms: parental participation is warranted or required when their children are legally 'incapable' of making decisions for themselves and unwarranted or excluded when their children are legally 'capable.'

The ontology of childhood that we are promoting strives to reconcile this 'agency vs. best interests' polemic. The recognition of young people's agency, by listening to their voices and attending to their experiences, should not be restricted to young people who are legally decisionally capable. The United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* highlights that young people have a right to participate in decisions that affect them and our research demonstrates that young people have interests and capacities to participate in such decisions (United Nations, 1989). Therefore, in situations where decisions for young people are made by persons with parental authority in terms of children's best interests, because they may not be considered legally capable to make decisions for themselves, the determination of their best interests should include an authentic recognition of their voices and agency. For young people considered legally capable decision-makers, parents may not have a legal right to participate or make decisions that affect them. However, the relational basis of agency described above highlights how young people are embedded within webs of ethically-meaningful relationships. Their agency is fostered and expressed in relationships with significant others. Even young people with recognized decisional autonomy can benefit from having others involved in the promotion of their interests.

Young people in 'resource-limited' contexts

Childhood studies research and practice improvements have developed in many diverse realms; some within 'resource-rich' contexts (e.g., Western approaches to schooling, youth protection, health care) and some within 'resource-limited' contexts (e.g., Indigenous communities, migrant newcomer communities, children living in poverty within resource-rich settings, as well as socio-politically disadvantaged regions of the world). Some common threads have been specified that help advance a transversal integrated conception of childhood and young people, including significant contributions to our understanding of children's agency in relation to other key concepts such as adversity, vulnerability, and survival (Mizen & Ofosu-Kusi, 2013; Oswell, 2013; Payne, 2012; Seymour, 2012).

It seems necessary to imagine multiple or pluralistic childhoods, because the idea of a unified decontextualized conception of childhood is neither possible nor helpful. Rather, culturally-attuned conceptions of childhood should be promoted (Bluebond-Langner & Korbin, 2007; Shallwani, 2010). Some culturally adapted and 'safe' approaches are described in the literature (i.e., referring to 'cultural safety' frameworks; Richardson & Williams; 2007). Our work has shown how culturally-attuned approaches can foster bridging of communication and understandings across diverse perspectives, and promote consideration of advances in resource-rich contexts that are more highly researched and supported, for less recognized resource-limited contexts (Behan et al., 2017). Reciprocally, some socio-economically disadvantaged resource-limited settings can enable the development of practices, out of necessity, that can reveal dimensions of young people's moral lives and capacities that might not otherwise have been investigated (Sebti et al., 2019). Transactional approaches to child development, described above, offer promising avenues for rooting research on children's experiences and development in social context.

The ontology of childhood articulated in this paper is well-suited for intercultural as well as 'resource-rich/resource-limited inter-worlds' exchanges, as conceptions of childhood and young people are rooted in local social imaginaries that shape local understandings and practices, attempting to reconcile more universal notions (e.g., children's rights, best interests, agency, voice, protection) with local outlooks.

Childhood Ethics: Implications for research and professional practice

In line with the broader childhood studies literature, we have argued for a view of children as active agents with participation interests, aspirations and capacities. This agential view of children requires research and professional practice approaches that effectively elicit their voices and experiences.

'Listening to children's voices' is a widely-recognized imperative within childhood studies as a way of better understanding their experiences and promoting recognition of children as active agents. However, how children's voices should be heard and understood and how they should be related to their agency can be unclear. Listening to their voices implies attending to articulations and significations that extend beyond mere audible utterances. Drawing on the notion of 'thick agency' (Esser, 2016), we have developed elsewhere a *thick* conception of children's voices, recognizing that children's expressions and related meanings are relationally embedded articulations of their agency (Carnevale, in press). We draw on hermeneutic approaches to discern what is meaningful for children in various situations.

In research, qualitative methods are particularly well-suited for eliciting children's voices and experiences in their respective social contexts, to reveal how contexts can enrich or thwart their experiences (Carnevale et al., 2008). Methods can include: (a) individual or group

interviews; (b) participant observation in children's own daily settings; (c) play and/or art-making activities; and (d) textual productions (e.g., diaries, blogs). Children's agential interests in participating in research should be recognized by seeking their assent to participation when they are not authorized to provide consent. Although exceptions to the requirement for assent may be permissible in some in some forms of therapeutic research, voluntary participation should be sought as much as possible. Also, there is a growing recognition that young people should participate in research as advisors or co-researchers (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008; Montreuil & Carnevale, 2018). Participatory research with children recognizes that children have interests regarding the specification of research priorities, designs, participant selection and recruitment, data analysis, interpretation and use of results. There is little experience and knowledge, however, on effective and respectful ways to do participatory research with young people: Which young people should participate? How many should participate? How should they participate? We have documented a participatory approach for qualitative research with children, using an ethnographic Childhood Ethics framework (Montreuil & Carnevale, 2018).

The approaches to research described above can be related to practice within the child-focused professions. Whether for health care, education, legal services, or child welfare/youth protection, children should be recognized as agents. This implies acknowledgment of their active participation in the discernment of their best interests, with input from their relational interlocutors, as well as the recognition of their legal and/or ethical rights to consent or assent to services or other activities that affect them. The 'children's voices elicitation' research methods described above can also be adapted for use in professional practice. These strategies can help professionals understand the experiences of individual children in their own social contexts, revealing children's aspirations, concerns, and interests - and the 'benefits' and 'burdens'

associated with these interests (to help discern their best interests) - as well as how their

relational embeddedness can favorably or unfavorably affect their experiences. Elsewhere, we

have described this process as a form of hermeneutic inquiry (Carnevale, 2017; Carnevale et al.,

2017). This process can be used with all children, regardless of age or expressive capacities,

given that agential expression is not limited solely to children's verbal articulation – referring

again to a 'thick' conception of children's voices (Carnevale, in press). We have published

demonstrations of these approaches applied to various situations, such as those described at the

beginning of this paper; e.g., youth with gender identity concerns (Noiseux et al., 2019), First

Nations youth with cancer (Van Praagh et al., 2018), child welfare (Montreuil et al., 2017; Van

Praagh et al., 2018), Tanzanian community (Sebti et al., 2019); as well as other related scenarios

(Carnevale, 2012; Carnevale & Gaudreault, 2013). Below, in the final section, we illustrate how

this approach can be applied in practice in our discussion of one of the concerns identified at the

beginning of this paper.

An emerging literature is highlighting children's participation interests in the broader

'governance' of professional services that affect them (Carnevale, 2012). Whether as episodic

advisors or as standing participants in steering committees, young people are demonstrating

interests and capacities to contribute as stakeholders in services or policy development, as well

as advisors in the resolution of arising concerns or cases. As with participatory research with

children, knowledge regarding participatory 'governance' with children is also under-developed.

Despite the significant body of theoretical and empirical advancements in Childhood

Ethics highlighted in this paper, more research is needed to further (a) develop effective

strategies for eliciting the voices of children whose experiences may be difficult to understand

(e.g., newborns; children who communicate differently; children whose mental health

experiences are poorly understood); (b) examine the diverse forms that agency can have in childhood; (c) investigate how to advance participatory approaches with children in research and in practice; and (d) develop pedagogical models and strategies in the child-focused professions that can promote effective teaching and learning of the approaches to children described in this paper.

Childhood Ethics in practice

The following have been adapted from actual situations encountered by the authors, to illustrate the range, complexity, and importance of ethical concerns that can be experienced by children and families, and professionals who work with them.

- A 10-year-old child has told his teacher that he is anxious about coming to school. One classmate has been making fun of him and takes things from him in front of his classmates. The child told the teacher not to tell anyone and not to confront that classmate, fearing it would make things worse.

- A 12-year-old First Nations youth living in a small community has a form of leukemia that responds well to chemotherapy, with a high chance of 'cure'. He and his family refuse chemotherapy. They state that they prefer traditional healing practices over Western medications.

- An 11-year old youth discloses to a psychologist that although raised as a boy, the youth feels more like a girl and seems relieved to talk about these feelings. The youth asks the psychologist not to tell the parents because 'they wouldn't understand' and would be 'very upset'.

- A hospitalized 9-year-old with end-stage cancer tells a nurse that he does not want to continue with chemotherapy. He does not want the nurse to tell his parents because he thinks they will be disappointed in him. He is prepared to comply with their wishes to continue cancer treatments.

- A social pediatrics team is conflicted over the position they should advocate regarding a 13-year-old youth whose family has been reported to youth protection services. The youth has made clear that she wants to remain with her family, while also revealing significant concerns in her home life. She has been touched by her mother's boyfriend's son in ways that distressed her.

- In a rural East African community, a nurse has been instructed by her supervisor to not provide HIV prevention information to 12 to 16 year-old youths, considering local views and practices that forbid these prevention practices. The community has one of the highest HIV rates in the world.

To demonstrate how the Childhood Ethics ontology described in this article can be operationalized in practice, we present an analysis of one of the situations outlined above. For additional illustrations of Childhood Ethics in practice, see Carnevale, 2012; Montreuil et al., 2017; Noiseux et al., 2019; Sebti et al., 2019; Van Praagh et al., 2018.

Let us examine the situation with the 9-year-old with end-stage cancer who tells a nurse that he (a) does not want to continue with chemotherapy and (b) does not want the nurse to tell his parents because he thinks they will be disappointed in him; that he will comply with their wishes to continue cancer treatments. Legal and ethical norms require that parents (i.e., persons with parental authority) should be the formal decision-makers for young children requiring cancer treatment and that treatment decisions should be based on the child's best interests. How

can the nurse respect these norms while also recognizing this child's agency? How should the child's agency be understood? What are the child's best interests? What should be the roles of adults with a 'duty of care' toward the child (e.g., parents, health care professionals) in responding to this situation?

The child has expressed apparently conflicting wishes. These are particularly problematic if the child is feeling coerced to comply with medical treatments that he is finding uncomfortable in the face of an end-stage condition where the life-prolonging benefits of treatment are very limited. On the other hand, the child's compliance with parental wishes may involve aspirations to follow what his parents want for him because (a) he believes that they want what is best for him and (b) he knows his illness is difficult for them and he wants to comply with what they want to do for him to not make things more difficult for them. Moreover, the chemotherapy experience needs to be understood from the child's perspective. In what ways is he finding it difficult? Can these difficulties be resolved – medically or otherwise – in a manner that is satisfactory for the child? Moving forward, the nurse could explore these questions with the child, while also exploring with the child who else can participate in these conversations to help reconcile the child's concerns.

In disclosing his concerns to his nurse, the child revealed some of his agential aspirations. The nurse can help him navigate his relationships (e.g., with his parents and other health care professionals) to find ways to address his concerns. The nurse could also discuss with the child how others may have responsibilities and aspirations regarding his wellbeing and how it could be helpful to consider how they can be helpful. Throughout this process, the nurse could draw on the voice elicitation approaches described in this paper. The nurse would also need to manage additional ethical dimensions of the situation (e.g., attending to relevant professional practice

standards, legal norms regarding consent and confidentiality). The process of inquiry and

reconciliation that the nurse would use, in line with the Childhood Ethics ontological approach

presented in this paper, is described in greater detail elsewhere; which we refer to as hermeneutic

retrieval (inquiry) and rapprochement (reconciliation) (Carnevale, 2017).

Young children are not commonly authorized to independently decide which

interventions or services they should receive. The designation of parents and others with duties

toward children as decisional authorities, to determine which interventions and services will

serve a child's best interests, can serve important protective purposes. However, the exclusion of

children from discussions and decisions that affect them can limit decision-makers'

understandings of the specific child's best interests and thwart the child's agency. Our Childhood

Ethics ontology promotes children's agential participation in discussions and decisions that

affect them by eliciting children's assent as an ethical practice standard (Carnevale, 2012). In

situations where a person is not legally authorized to provide consent (e.g., young children),

assent refers to a person's voluntary cooperation with a proposed activity while the person with

parental authority provides consent as well. Seeking assent also entails that persons are

continuously receiving relevant information about the interventions and services that are being

considered and how these can affect their wellbeing. Children's assent is required for their

participation in non-therapeutic research, yet it is not commonly recognized as an ethical

standard in non-research practice (e.g., education, child welfare, health care). If assent was

continually sought in an authentic manner with this child (e.g., through health professionals-

family meetings), it could have helped identify, and hopefully reconcile, the child's concerns at

an earlier time.

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(For additional references to work conducted by the authors' VOICE research team, see the VOICE website: www.mcgill.ca/voice)

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